

Athenian tragedy at a distance

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The Greeks gave us the word 'theatre' – 'the place for gazing' – and they gave us the word 'tragedy', whatever that may once have meant – 'a song for teenagers whose voices are breaking and sound like billy-goats' is the latest in a long line of educated scholarly guesses. But it is far too easy to imagine that the theatres we have today are simply modern equivalents of their ancient ancestors. It is in fact one of the Siren-like powers of ancient tragic poetry itself that it can lull us into believing in its own timelessness, its unchanging youthfulness and truth-speaking across the ages.

But the theatre in classical Athens occupied an almost entirely different place in the lives of the Athenians from any of its modern western descendants – even (perhaps especially) those that have tried to 'recreate the original'. There was a lot more to see in 'the place for gazing' than we are often led to believe. We need to abandon all our preconceptions about what theatre is; and when we look closely at what went on in the precinct of the Greek god Dionysos in Athens, we discover a rather alien and bizarre phenomenon. But the attempt to do this will help us understand not only the important role tragedy played in its original context, but also some of the things that continue to make tragedy today often both a frustrating and endlessly fascinating experience.

Open-air competition

First, we must forget our ideas about the physical shape of theatres: the theatre of Dionysos was outdoors, under the open sky on the southern slope of the acropolis in Athens; there were no walls, and no darkness, because performances began early and continued all day. The audience of some 15,000 people (largely, if not entirely, male) who sat in a huge semi-circular ring that rose up around the acting area could see one another as well as they could see the performers. This greater ability to see one another, along with the sense of being seen by each other, linked them more closely together, encouraging a more active and interactive form of general participation. Both audience and performers were citizens of Athens, the same men who on other days met in the assembly-building (shaped very much like the theatre) to decide on the most important issues affecting the *polis*. In the theatre they were also called upon to make decisions – because the poetic performances that took place were all competitions, judged by a carefully selected panel of citizens. Poets, producers, and actors were all competing for prizes and prestige.

The competition wasn't always a sedate affair conducted with 'classical decorum': we catch glimpses of *choregi*, the super-rich citizen-producers who were required to fund the cost of

the chorus, breaking into violence and reverting to all sorts of dubious stratagems in their mad desire to *win*. Laws had to be passed to punish – with death – those who tampered with the urns, locked under official seal, containing the names of the men who were to judge the competitions. One *choregus* broke into the silversmith's workshop at night where his opponent was having gold crowns made for his chorus-members, and smashed them to pieces. Then, on the day of the competition itself, he nailed up the entrance to the orchestra (where the chorus danced and sang), menaced the judges when bribery wouldn't work and, to cap it all, punched his opponent (no less a figure than the orator Demosthenes) in the face as he was leading on his chorus in front of the assembled multitude.

Tragedy was always performed as part of a festival, and by far the most important of these was the so-called Great or City Dionysia that took place in March. At least in the fifth century, tragedies were produced once at these festivals without expectation of them ever being performed again. Tragedians weren't writing for a reading public nor for repertory theatre – in fact, it is only relatively late in the development of tragedy that poets are said to 'write' tragedies at all. The normal expression for what the tragic poet does is to 'teach'. He teaches his work – including its music and dance-steps – to his chorus and actors; but he is also seen in a more general sense to be a teacher of the city, though his voice is always one competing among many others claiming to do the same.

Dionysian do

The first thing was to bring the god back into the heart of the city – a wooden effigy of Dionysos was escorted in procession from an outlying region of Attica. Unlike the godless Boeotians over the hills whose ancestors refused to accept Dionysos as a god and accordingly saw their king torn to pieces by his own mother; or their own Attic forebears in the district of Icaria, who were smitten with an uncomfortable case of permanent erection for doing the same, the Athenians of 'today', as this annual procession proclaimed, welcomed this strange and dangerous god into their midst with open arms. Boisterous celebrations – lubricated by plenty of the god's great gift, wine – continued long into the evening of this first day.

The question of the relation between tragedy and its patron god, Dionysos, is complex and endlessly debated. Suffice to say that even in antiquity it was a live issue. There was an Athenian proverb – 'Nothing to do with Dionysos!' – which seems to have circulated as a kind of complaint in response to the growing complexity of the performances in the festival, as if they had strayed too far from the myths of Dionysos himself. But Dionysos clearly remained an appropriate patron for even the most developed form of Athenian drama: a complex god with a wide range of powers and spheres of influence, Dionysos was not only the god of wine, but ritual madness, the mask (very important in ancient drama), and the promise of a happy afterlife were also associated with him. He was a god of contradictory

tendencies – pleasure and peace on the one hand, and brutal violence and suffering on the other; wild nature and developed culture – contrasts that reflect basic paradoxes in human life. One of the major benefits of the cult of Dionysos in general was to scramble the accepted, 'normal' images of social order, to question the political and masculine values of the city. Dionysos himself was so many times represented in 'feminine' terms, as in Euripides' *Bacchae*. The many inversions and contradictions that make up the god who was born both from a mortal mother and from the thigh of Zeus are altogether appropriate to the illusions and inversions of the theatrical experience.

Sacrifice gone wrong

The next day was occupied with further preparations and an event called the *proagon*. At this, the poets appeared before the public on a raised platform with their choruses and actors but without their masks or costumes. They gave some sort of outline of the dramas with which they were to compete, a kind of trailer. The most important event of this day was, however, the bringing of the effigy of Dionysos right into the theatre itself in another elaborate procession. It was installed in a place of honour in the front row, facing the orchestra, where it remained throughout all the performances, watching over them.

This procession culminated in a huge sacrificial meal in the precinct of Dionysos. Sacrifice was an absolutely central social and religious institution in Greece. It regulated the relations between gods, men, and the animal kingdom – a three-fold structure very important in Greek thought. The animal was killed in a highly ritualised manner, and its thigh-bones, wrapped in fat and incense, were burnt completely for the gods, who – though of course they had no need for nourishment – were thought to enjoy the scent from the smoke, and to participate in the meal in this way. The rest of the meat was distributed in equal portions among all the citizens. The scale of the sacrificial activity at the Great Dionysia was massive: in one year, more than 240 bulls were led to the slaughter. This may have been a main attraction for many at the festival, since meat was something of a luxury. The idea of a massive, state-funded banquet for all citizens that was at the same time a religious experience is a long way indeed from the modern, western experience of theatre, as is the veritable blood-bath that must have accompanied ritual killing on such a scale.

It's worth bearing in mind the importance of sacrifice when we turn to look at tragedy itself. Sacrificial scenes and images drawn from sacrifice occupy an important place in tragedy, but it's clearly no mirror of ordinary social practice. *Within* the world of tragic drama, sacrifice generally goes terribly wrong. Sacrificial practice is distorted, or inverted: men and, very often, young women are killed and their deaths recorded with the technical language normally reserved for the precise acts of animal sacrifice. Such is the case of Agamemnon in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, slaughtered like a bull by his own wife. Yet Agamemnon himself had earlier sacrificed his own daughter Iphigeneia in no uncertain terms. In tragedy, sacrifice

doesn't indicate the stable position of man in a clearly marked position between the gods and beasts as it should in real life, but rather points to his possible swing between excessive, god-like power and unruly, bestial violence.

But we have still not yet reached the theatre and the performances which formed the centre-piece of the festival and which are its enduring legacy. The city gathered together early – at dawn, in fact – and the theatre was purified by killing a piglet and carrying its body around the orchestra. The most likely order of performance puts the contest of 'dithyrambic' choruses first. This was a type of lyric poetry closely associated with Dionysos, often in the form of a hymn to the god. It was performed here in two categories – ten choruses of 50 men and ten of 50 boys, representing each of the ten so-called tribes of Athens, geographical and political division of the citizens. This competition was designed to foster a kind of healthy rivalry within the citizen-body – and the audience itself was divided in its seating-arrangement in the theatre into wedges corresponding to the tribes, so a lot of 'barracking' doubtless took place. A victory in this competition brought great honour to the tribe as a whole. Already on this first day some 1,000 Athenian men and boys were thus directly engaged as participants in these performances – a very 'male' business, as virtually all high-profile public activities in Athens were.

The next day was devoted to the contest between five comedies; while the three following days each saw a group of three tragedies by a single tragedian with an accompanying satyr-play. It's easy to forget that the serious, elevated medium of tragedy always kept such close company with the satyr-play. Its chorus was composed of satyrs, the semi-bestial, furry-legged and long-tailed mischievous companions of Dionysos who were utterly devoted to wine and all other forms of physical satisfaction and indulgence.

Disorder inside frame

Just before the performances of tragedy began, however, there was a series of significant activities in the theatre, and it's interesting to consider the relation that is set up between these, the most immediate frame of tragic drama, and those dramas themselves. These pre-performance practices set the dramatic competitions very firmly in the realm of fifth-century civic and political life.

In the first place, the ten generals, the most powerful military and political leaders in the *polis*, offered libations to the gods. Then there was a display of the tribute brought by the subject-allies of the Athenian empire; it was carried into the orchestra of the theatre and counted before the assembled audience. This was a forceful demonstration of the power of the city of Athens, and of its own confident awareness of this power. What's more, this tribute was destined to glorify the city in all sorts of very concrete ways – such as to fund enormous building programmes to beautify the public face of Athens – it helped, among

other things, to build the Parthenon. Don't forget that behind, and crucial to, the glorious achievements of the Athenians lies the gold of their 'friends', the allies who were also subjects of the empire, and that the enormous and enormously silent contribution of the labour of slaves also needs to be reckoned with.

A third element of ceremonial was the announcement by a herald of the names of public benefactors of Athens. These were often given some special honour, such as the award of a gold crown or front-row seats in the theatre. This was clearly a way of stimulating others in the audience to similar service. A fourth and final activity was a parade of the orphans of men who had died in war. These boys had been brought up at the expense of the city and were now given their full armour at the point of coming of age, becoming adult males and full citizens. Here the city was playing its role as the guardian of its citizens, and emphasized in return what it expected of these young soldier-citizens. Much could be said about what are perhaps to us rather bizarre preliminaries to the performance of tragedy, but one thing at least is clear: these rituals are all linked closely to the authority and power of the city itself, to its military and social security, and to the strong ties between the individual citizen and his city. And yet what followed these events in the theatre were tragedies in which the social order has so often collapsed and broken down; where men attempt to go beyond or actively challenge the bounds of accepted social behaviour and the confines of city life; where cities themselves are often in ruins as a consequence of disastrous wars or civil strife; a world of conflict, disorder, and aggression.

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